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Greek Political Terminology in the Mycenaean Period

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ΕΝ ΑΘΗΝΑΙΣ 2005

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GREEK POLITICAL TERMINOLOGY
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When Heinrich Schliemann in the later 19th century brought to light the marvellous treasures of the princely graves at Mycenae, he opened the door to the archaeological recovery of a highly developed civilisation on the Greek Mainland, the Mycenaean culture. Soon afterwards the Minoan Civilisation of Crete was discovered by Sir Arthur Evans.

The discovery of the two high cultures of the Greek Bronze Age fundamentally changed the attitude of classical scholars towards the Homeric epics. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had been previously considered a field of research for philologists, literary historians and mythologists. Now the interest of ancient historians and classical archaeologists, too, was attracted. Classical scholars seriously started to consider the possibility that the Homeric tales about the great past and the "Heroic Age" were, in fact, a reminiscence of the Mycenaean Age. This hypothesis received a further impetus by the decipherment of Linear B.

Clay tablets inscribed with the so-called Linear B script were found at the beginning of last century in the Palace of Knossos, and shortly before the Second World War in the Palace of Pylos in Messenia. For a long time Linear B remained a challenge to code-breakers and decipherers, until the British architect Michael Ventris was successful in 1952. His decipherment of Linear B and his identification of its language as Greek were confirmed by John Chadwick, a specialist in the field of Greek linguistics. Since then we know that the first texts written in Greek were not the Homeric epics, but the Linear B-Texts of the Mycenaean period. Since the decipherment, Linear B tablets have been discovered in the Mycenaean palaces of Mycenae, Thebes and Tiryns. Short Linear B inscriptions were moreover found in recent years at Midea and at Dimini, and at Chania in Crete. In contrast, the mighty structure at Gla Linear B has not produced any Linear B texts, and Professor Iakovidis is probably right that Gla was not a palace.

At first historians and literary scholars were disappointed by the fact that the Linear B tablets only contained the records of the officials and bureaucrats of the Mycenaean palaces. However, even so these texts reveal that almost all Olympic gods had been already worshipped in the Mycenaean period, and many Homeric and classical Greek terms for arts and handicrafts, for agriculture, husbandry and foodstuff can be found in the Linear B-texts. One document from Knossos even refers to a topographical designation called "Achaia". Moreover, scholars were particularly fascinated by the occurrence of political titles and terms such as *ἄναξ*, *βασιλεύς*, *ἄστυ*, *δῆμος*, *λαός*, *γέροντες* and *γερουσία*. As a consequence, many scholars became convinced that the "Achaioi" of the Homeric epics had been, in fact, the inhabitants of Greece in the Mycenaean period, and that kingship, political structure and social organisation described in the Homeric epics had been firmly rooted in the Mycenaean Age.

However, enthusiasm soon subsided. Closer introspection into the Linear B texts revealed fundamental differences rather than similarities between the Mycenaean world and Classical Antiquity. It was pointed out that the significance of many words was different in the Linear B texts from what it was in the Homeric epics, and that a great percentage of Mycenaean technical terms were no longer preserved in the lexicon of classical Greek.

For instance, it became apparent that the terms of *ἄναξ*, *βασιλεύς*, *ἄστυ*, *δῆμος*, *λαός*, *γέροντες* and *γερουσία* only represented about one quarter of Mycenaean political terminology. The majority of Mycenaean terms for political power and organisation did not survive the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces, and many of them have remained obscure. Therefore it is obvious that the organisation of the Mycenaean palace system was altogether different not only from those of the Homeric epics, but also from those of any other period of ancient Greece. My own dissertation on Homeric Kingship in 1970 came to the conclusion that there was no continuity between the political structures of the Mycenaean palaces and the world of the Homeric kings.

Moreover, since the 1970ies and 80ies new methodological approaches particularly in the fields of Social Anthropology and Oral History Studies have been applied. As a result, historians and scholars of Greek literature nowadays prefer to underline the disruption between the Mycenaean period and the 1st millennium BC of Greece. It has been pointed out that the collapse

of the Mycenaean palaces and the loss of Linear B script were followed by almost five centuries of illiteracy, the so-called "Dark Ages". Therefore the political conditions and the material world described in the Homeric epics are nowadays often interpreted as reminiscences either of the "Dark Ages", or as a reflection of Homer's own world, the early Archaic period around 700 BC. According to such opinions, Greek myths and the Homeric epics contained no memory of the Mycenaean period.

But how can we then explain the occurrence of ἀναξ, βασιλεύς, ἄστυ, δῆμος, λαός, γέροντες and γερουσία in the Linear B texts? These words not only represent basic political terms in the Homeric epics. Βασιλεύς, δῆμος, λαός and ἄστυ have even survived until this day, signifying fundamental elements of Greek political organisation.

Before we continue, let us first consider the chronological development of the Mycenaean period. It is generally divided into the Early Mycenaean Period (ca. 1600 – 1400 BC), the Palace Period (1400–1200), and the Post-Palatial Period (1200 BC– 1070 BC).

The Early Mycenaean Period was the era of the Shaft-Graves at Mycenae. It was contemporary with the New Palaces of Minoan Crete. The Minoan civilisation had then arrived at its pinnacle, and among its achievements there was the so-called Linear A writing system. This script has remained still undeciphered, but it may be assumed that it was used for economic purposes, as well as for religious matters.

The Early Mycenaean culture was widely influenced by the superior cultural achievements and aesthetical standards of the Minoan palaces. However, according to the present state of knowledge neither the palace organisation nor the Linear A script were adopted during the Early phase of the Mycenaean period.

Around or after 1450 BC all Minoan Palaces were destroyed. Only at Knossos the palace organisation was continued, but now the Linear A script was transformed into the writing system of Linear B. As we know, Linear B was used for expressing the Greek language. It is therefore clear that after the destruction of the Minoan palaces, large parts of Crete must have come under the rule of invaders from Mycenaean Greece. The palace of Knossos in its last stage was a Mycenaean centre.

These events inaugurated the rise of the Mycenaean Palace period. The

complex political, social and economic structures of the palaces and the expansion of Mycenaean economic interests now required the use of written records. According to the *communis opinio* the Linear B script was first developed at Knossos after the model of Minoan Linear A. It was then adopted by all palatial centres of mainland Greece.

The Mycenaean palace of Knossos came to an end during the 14th century BC. The reasons are not known to us. The palaces of the mainland lasted until 1200 and then fell a victim to violent destructions. After that the palace organisation was abandoned, and together with the palaces the art of writing, too, vanished. An interval of more than 400 years followed when Greece remained illiterate until the Age of Homer (12th – late 8th century BC). The two literate and highly developed civilisations of the Aegean Bronze Age fell into oblivion. Greeks of later periods modelled their collective memory of the past on the Homeric tradition about the Trojan War and on myths about the deeds of the protagonists of a “Heroic Age”.

The centuries between the demise of the Mycenaean palaces and the rise of Greek literacy written in the Alphabet script have been called a “Dark Age”. However, this name has become obsolete by a substantial increase in archaeological data from new excavations and intensified material study. Although still no written records have been found, the centuries between 1200 and 700 BC were by no means devoid of creativity and inspiration, and they contributed greatly to the formation of the civilisation of Classical Antiquity. Moreover, it is now clear that the fall of the palace system did not portend the end of the Mycenaean Age. The 12th and 11th centuries until ca. 1070 BC still were Mycenaean in character, even if the palaces remained a matter of the past. In recent years it has become clear that during the Post-Palatial Period the Mycenaean cultural heritage was gradually transformed and handed down to the following centuries.

Under these premises, let us turn again to the Greek political terms in the Linear B corpus. They occur both in the texts of Knossos, that is to say, in the 14th century BC, and in the very last texts of around 1200 BC. They were therefore used throughout the Palace Period between 1400 and 1200.

Wa-na-ka/wanax/ἄναξ was the title of the rulers of the Mycenaean palaces. According to the textual evidence *wanax* was a divine king who carried out religious functions, who was responsible for providing religious offerings and

feasts, and who could even receive honours which otherwise were reserved to the gods. A *wanax* was the greatest private landholder in his kingdom. His landed property was called *temenos*, a term which in classical Greek was used for the sacred territory (τέμενος) of a temple. The *wanax* appointed high state officials, and he probably was also the supreme military authority of his state. Archaeologically the *wanax* is closely related to the so-called Megaron complex of Mycenaean palaces, with the throne room and many installations and implement for ritual activities.

In post-Mycenaean times, ἄναξ was no longer the title of a king. In the Homeric epics the word indicates a one-man rule. It is often applied to kings, but ἄναξ may be also the houselord, the master of slaves or even the master of animals. Ἄναξ has the same range of meanings as *dominus* in Late Latin, “seigneur” in French or “lord” in English. In classical antiquity the word was no longer used for mortals. It was confined to Gods.

The Homeric title of a king is βασιλεύς. In fact, it has remained the title of kings throughout Greek history, even if the position of its bearer changed over the centuries. In the Homeric epics the word designates the hereditary leader of a political community. It is applied to people who hold a sceptre, who keep their rule for their whole life, and who hand down their position to their sons. Homeric βασιλεύς are protected by the gods, they hold portions of land which are called τέμενος, and some are addressed as ἄναξ. It cannot be excluded that these features of Homeric kingship were a Mycenaean heritage, even if the actual position of a Homeric βασιλεύς was widely different from that of a palace king.

In the Linear B texts βασιλεύς appears in the linguistically older form of *qa-si-re-u*. But it was by no means the title of kings. Moreover, *qa-si-re-u* is conspicuously absent from the central administration. People carrying this title operate at the village level of social, economic and political organization. Yet they must have been people of a certain authority. They supervised local work groups particularly of smiths, and they led the labour groups and military forces who were levied in the districts in order to work for and at the palace. In one instance a *qa-si-re-u* was among a series of provincial officials who made contributions of gold to the palace of Pylos. The position of a *qa-si-re-u* was inherited, and they were involved in religious functions.

Moreover, *qa-si-re-u* appears connected with the terms of *ke-ro-te/*

gerontes/γέροντες and *ke-ro-si-ja*/*geronsia*/γερουσία. Unfortunately these words occur only once in the Linear B corpus. But they seem to indicate that on the local level of palace kingdoms there existed societies which were based on kin groups. *Qa-si-re-u* may thus be defined as a 'local chieftain'. At his side there was a council of elders, that is to say a body of the most distinguished members of his kin group. In specific circumstances a *qa-si-re-u* was drawn into relations with the central authority at the palace (see above).

Da-mo/damos is yet another term which belongs to the provincial level of a Mycenaean palace state. However, it does not refer to kin groups. *Damos* rather designates the political organisation of a settlement or of a district within the palace state. The members of the *damos* decide, for instance, on the distribution of landholdings within the community, and on the participation in taxes and labour obligations to the central administration of the palace. The texts of Pylos even refer to a legal conflict between the high priestess of the religious centre of the kingdom, and the *damos* of this district. It appears that a Mycenaean *damos* could raise its voice against the central administration. In this sense, a Mycenaean *damos* apparently had more political influence than the Homeric δῆμος whose main function was to listen to the βασιλεῖς. Moreover, the Mycenaean texts testify to the high antiquity of the institution of δῆμος.

Λαός, the term for a people united under the same government within a given territory seems to have existed in Mycenaean times. However, it is only attested in the title of *ra-wa-ke-ta*/*lawagetas*. The man who carried this title held a very high rank since in the Mycenaean palace state he came second only after the *wanax*. Literally the title means "leader of the people". However, we do not know if this really was his function. According to the texts his functions were similar to those of the *wanax* – except that he was not involved in cult and religious practices.

Finally, the Linear B texts contain the term of *wa-tu*/*wastu*/ἄστν. At Knossos the word occurs in the compound *pe-da wa-tu* "to the town". The context implies that the town in case was Knossos. A Pylos text reads "And the town leads the offerings". In this case *wa-tu* / *wastu* cannot refer to the settlement but to its inhabitants. Since the palaces both of Knossos and of Pylos were surrounded by extended lower towns, the term *wa-tu* is quite compatible

with the meaning of ἄστυ in later periods, that is to say, a large settlement in its geographical extension, and inhabited by larger populations.

Summing up, most of those Mycenaean political terms which survived in Homeric and classical Greek were not connected with the central administration of the palaces, but with the local organisations on the level of districts and villages. In my opinion this is exactly the reason why they were able to survive beyond the Mycenaean Age.

When the palaces collapsed, all structures and institutions of the central administration disappeared, and the larger territories under palace rule broke down into small political units. It was therefore the organisations on the local level, such as *damos* and kin groups (*ke-ro-si-ja/geronsiai*) who were able to recover after the disaster and to establish the political conditions after the fall of the palaces. Research work of recent years has shown that this development must have started right in the post-palatial period of the 12th century. This also was the period when the rise of *qa-si-re-u* from a local dignitary to kingship took place. Moreover, two or three generations after the catastrophes of 1200 BC the memory of palaces and divine kings must still have been alive. The archaeological evidence for the post-palatial period gives evidence for attempts to restore some elements of the ideology and power of Mycenaean palace rule. It is therefore not surprising that the title of ἄναξ, too, survived until the Age of Homer. Presumably it was claimed by the βασιλεῖς in order to enhance their political power. It is my conviction that the post-palatial Mycenaean period played a major role in the transformation of Greek political organisation and institutions between the Mycenaean Age and the aftermath.

Finally, I would like to underline that the political terms discussed this evening were of high antiquity. With the exception of *wanax/ἄναξ*, an indoeuropean origin has been acknowledged of almost all of them. Moreover, these terms were not connected with the political and administrative structure of the Mycenaean palaces. They belonged to the local level of districts and villages. The only exceptions were *wanax/ἄναξ* and *wastu/ἄστυ*. It has been convincingly argued by Mycenaean scholars that the title *wanax* was adopted together with the palace kingship, and that it probably was of Minoan origin. The other terms, including ἄστυ, must have had existed before the adoption of the palace system, most probably during the Early Mycenaean period.

Archaeological records of the Early Mycenaean period point to small

polities governed by residences of the "acropolis type": They were situated on the top or upper slope of hills commanding over the surrounding areas. Some of them were fortified. These residences cannot be called palaces. The adequate Greek term is perhaps μέγαρον. Ostentatious tombs in the neighbourhood are generally accepted as the funerary monuments of rulers. Since their numbers generally is two or three, it is assumed that the political structure was oligarchic, characterized by elites or ruling families who competed for political power. The most spectacular testimony to this period is provided by the Shaft-Graves at Mycenae. The title of the Early Mycenaean aristocrats may well have been βασιλεύς, and the name of the political structures may have been πόλις.

However, when the Mycenaean palace states emerged, the Early Mycenaean organisations were displaced or pushed aside into a marginal position. It was only after the collapse of the palace system that the earlier structures re-emerged in the 12th century BC, and from then onwards remained essential for the development of Greek political life.

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